NOSTALGIA

Seasonal traditions maintained – but does school share goodwill?

MIKE PETTY AND JAMES MILNER LOOK THROUGH THE CAMBRIDGE NEWS ARCHIVES AT SOME OF THE STORIES FROM CHRISTMAS PAST

A young farmer's boy weighs up turkeys destined for the Christmas Day table

STAFF

'Quaint old customs and happy memories' – 1932

CHRISTMAS with its quaint old customs and happy memories is with us once again, bringing that spirit of goodwill and that sense of fellowship befitting the anniversary of the wonderful nativity.

Many Cambridgeshire housewives baked an extra batch of bread on Christmas Eve in the belief the bread baked on this Eve would never go mouldy.

Old country folk told you that at midnight, the pixies and fairies visited the houses of those who were good to them, and left gifts on the doorstep.

They told you also that if you looked in the cow shed at midnight on Christmas night, you would see the cattle kneeling in their stalls in adoration and memory of the new-born saviour and that bees awoke and sang in their hives at this hour.

Open house was kept in many a Cambridgeshire village on Christmas Eve, and hot frumenty, home-made and potent raisin, cowslip and rhubarb wines served to all comers while the bells of the ancient church pealed out their message of goodwill to the countryside.

The carol singers were abroad this night with harp and viol, cornet and flute tramping the lanes and by-paths in the lanthorn's dim light and often over a snow clad land.

They carolled or welcomed in some warm farm kitchen and cheered with mulberry ale hot elderberry wine, mince pies, and spice cake and cheese.

Years ago, Christmas morning brought the children to our door singing their greetings. Some of the girls carried dolls resting on decorated boxes to represent the Child Jesus in the manger.

Others bought 'wassail boughs' of holly, mistletoe and coloured ribbons.

Only occasionally nowadays is this pretty custom observed though we do look for a 'fair man' to 'let in' Christmas and bring us luck. But it is an old superstition that it is unlucky for a female to be the first person to cross the threshold on Christmas morning.

The custom of decorating our houses with evergreens for the season is an ancient one, though they must be taken down and burned before the 12th day after Christmas to prevent misfortune attending the household.

It was believed unlucky to bring holly into the house except at Christmas. Mistletoe however, as a mystic plant, has a significance. At one time the berries were considered a cure for certain ailments and the leaves and branches were dried and used by witches in their evil brews.

The mummers and the lords of misrule and his attendants made sport while Morris and sword dances with 'hobby horses', clowns and fools capered in the streets.

Boys acted the tragedy of the 'Derby Tup' dressed as butchers and farmhands and in in some country districts and men went mumming dressed in women's clothes and with their faces blackened.

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